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### Things ain't what they used to be? Coaches perceptions of commitment in developing athletes

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Things Ain't What They Used to Be? Coaches Perceptions of Commitment  
in Developing Athletes

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## Abstract

Appropriate levels of commitment are fundamental to the adolescent athlete, if they are to be successful in progressing through their high-performance environments (e.g., Hill, McNamara, & Collins, 2015). Accordingly, the present study sought to ascertain academy coaches' perceptions regarding commitment in their developing athletes. Specifically, to understand the levels of perceived commitment, associated behaviors, commonalties and contrasts apparent across a range of sporting environments. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 male UK-based academy coaches ( $M$  age = 41.25,  $SD$  = 8.76 years), whom worked full time with elite youth performers between the ages of 15 to 18 years. The sample comprised four soccer coaches, four coaches from other team sports (rugby union, rugby league, and cricket) and four coaches from individual sports (swimming, tennis, judo, and badminton), with a mean of 13.67 years' coaching experience ( $SD$  = 8.42 years). Inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) identified the following overarching themes: a) what do we want? b) what are they like? and c) what do we do? The study provides a valuable insight into the ideal commitment characteristics and the reality of the adolescent athlete, along with current strategies coaches are employing within their practice. By adding to the understanding of this important area, we hope sporting organizations, practitioners, parents, and coaches can use the information to tailor their interventions and service provision accordingly in supporting their athletes negotiate key developmental opportunities.

**Lay summary:** This paper explored academy coaches' perceptions of commitment from their developing athletes. The study provides a valuable insight into the ideal commitment characteristics and the reality of the adolescent athlete, along with current strategies coaches are employing within their practice from a cross-sport approach.

**Keywords:** adolescence, coaching, performance academies, psychology, youth sport

## Things Ain't What They Used to Be? Coaches Perceptions of Commitment in Developing Athletes

Developing effective performance pathways for the next generation of athletes, is a long-term strategy of the UK's National Governing Bodies in their quest to produce world-class performers (UK Sport, 2015). Furthermore, a number of professional sporting organizations (e.g., soccer, cricket, rugby union, & rugby league) have invested in developing their academy structures to better prepare their talented junior athletes for senior sporting success (Finn & McKenna, 2010) and see first-teams populated with academy graduates (Rowley, Potrac, Knowles, & Lee, 2019). This has included several larger scale initiatives, for example, the English Premier League's elite player development plan (EPPP), to increase the capacity and caliber of home-grown players (Premier League, 2016). However, with professional sporting organizations willing to recruit the highest caliber of players on a global scale, the uncertainty surrounding opportunities to become world-class and successfully transition to senior sport, magnifies the importance of athlete commitment throughout the development pathways (Mills, Butt, Maynard, & Harwood, 2014; Schnell, Mayer, Diehl, Zipfel, & Thiel, 2014).

Sport commitment is defined as a psychological construct reflecting "the desire and resolve to continue participation in a sport over time" (Scanlan, Carpenter, Schmidt, Simons, & Keeler, 1993, p. 7). Motivation to participate in and continue competitive sport is one of the most extensively studied areas in sport psychology (Weiss & Ferrer-Caja, 2002) and the sport commitment model (Scanlan et al., 1993) provides a theoretical framework to examine this construct. Building from interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), Rusbult's (1980) investment model of commitment provided the initial empirical base for the sport version of the model. The primary proposition of the sport commitment model is that greater enjoyment, personal investment, involvement opportunities, social constraints, and fewer

involvement alternatives should translate into stronger resolve to continue participation; a suggestion which has been empirically tested in several adolescent sport contexts (e.g., Carpenter & Coleman, 1998; Weiss & Weiss, 2007; Weiss, Weiss, & Amorose, 2010). Alternatively, if developing athletes believe ability leads to success and their current participation is too time-consuming, stressful or boring, this is likely to detract from their enjoyment, desire to continue, sustained effort, and participation behavior (Carpenter & Morgan, 1999; Weiss et al., 2010).

A further consideration is that the full-time participation across these performance academies coincides with the transitional period of adolescence, whereby junior athletes can experience numerous changes on a physical, psychological, and social level (Schnell et al., 2014). From a psychological perspective, adolescence is a time for development of the executive functions; that is, cognitive skills that enable the control and coordination of thoughts and behavior, generally associated with the prefrontal cortex (Choudhury, Blakemore, & Charman, 2006). Development of the executive functions mark the beginning of more complex cognitive processes such as abstract thought, metacognition, problem-solving, and deductive reasoning (Smith & Handler, 2007). Furthermore, biological changes in structure and connectivity within the brain interact with increased experience, knowledge, and changing social demands to produce rapid cognitive growth (Beltz, 2018).

As a consequence, Steinberg (2010) describes a maturational imbalance that can occur between the development of socioemotional and cognitive control systems, contributing to behavioral characteristics of adolescence. Considering also the requirement for a long-term commitment to excel in these high-performance environments, the adolescent athlete can therefore exhibit less than desirable behaviors. For example, across a variety of sports (cricket, rugby union, soccer) the combination of developing adolescent and high-performance expectation has led to athletes displaying challenging behaviors, emotional

unpredictability, vulnerability, and commitment issues (Devaney, Nesti, Ronkainen, Littlewood, & Richardson, 2018; Hill, McNamara, & Collins, 2015; Morris, Tod, & Oliver, 2016). These arguably are in contrast to the psychological characteristics (e.g., confidence, motivation, ability to set and achieve goals) identified as positive features of the development process (e.g., Collins & MacNamara, 2012; Gould, Dieffenbach & Moffett, 2002).

Interestingly, in the Hill et al. (2015) study, English rugby union academy coaches and directors deemed commitment to be dual-effect when interviewed regarding the psycho-behavioral based features of effective talent development in their academy athletes. For example, as a positive construct, commitment was demonstrated in perseverance, discipline, a positive work ethic, the ability to sacrifice, and generally in terms of adolescent athletes' commitment to develop themselves. The construct of over-commitment however, especially if left unmanaged, was perceived as potentially detrimental to an athlete's development, with the athlete partaking in well-meaning but misguided developmental activities, for example, overtraining due to believing 'more is better'. Finally, a lack of commitment was regarded as a negative psychological construct due to adolescent athletes failing to progress, putting in minimal effort, and not taking ownership for their development.

As such, the scope for further investigating the seemingly adaptive psychological construct of commitment becomes apparent. Given the necessity for athletes to optimally negotiate key developmental opportunities (MacNamara, Button, & Collins, 2010), it is surprising as to the relative dearth of research examining this psychological characteristic that may both help and hinder the developmental process. Furthermore, this becomes even more apparent, when taking into account that 15 to 18-year-old athletes are approaching their junior-to-senior transition, known for its challenging nature (Stambulova, Engström, Franck, Linnér, & Lindahl, 2015). Therefore, the appropriate levels of commitment are fundamental to the adolescent athlete, if they are to be successful in progressing through their high-

performance pathway or professional academy structures. Accordingly, the primary focus of this study was to ascertain academy coaches' perceptions regarding commitment in their developing athletes. Specifically, we were interested in understanding the levels of perceived commitment and associated behaviors across a range of sporting environments, looking for commonalities and contrasts which might be apparent.

## **Method**

### **Methodology**

The research was located within an interpretive paradigm, through which researchers aim to discover reality through participant's views, their own background and experiences (Cresswell, 2007). Accordingly, rich descriptions of academy coaches' perceptions of commitment in their developing athletes were gathered (Smith & Sparkes, 2017). Furthermore, the research was underpinned by ontological relativism and epistemological constructionism, whereby an assumption is made that participants may have their own unique interpretation or perspective of their coaching experiences (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Academy coaches' perceptions were accordingly investigated through qualitative semi-structured interviews, employing inductive thematic analysis strategies to develop and describe themes that emerged from the data, while using the language of the participants to fully describe the themes (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2017). Thematic analysis was thus chosen based on our interpretive paradigm, and as Braun and Clarke (2006) state, can be applied across a range of epistemological approaches including constructionism.

### **Participants**

Following institutional ethical approval and informed consent, 12 UK-based academy coaches were recruited to participate in this study. The coaches were purposefully selected on the basis that they worked full time with elite youth performers between the ages of 15 to 18 years. The coaches were all male, Caucasian, ranging in age from 31 to 58 years ( $M =$

41.25,  $SD = 8.76$  years). The sample comprised four soccer coaches (English Premier League Academies), four coaches from other team sports (England Rugby Union Premiership Academy, Super League Rugby League Academy, and English County Cricket Academy) and four coaches from individual sports (British Swimming, Lawn Tennis Association, British Judo, and Great Britain Badminton). Four participants held the position of Academy Director, a further four were employed as age-group Head Coaches, three as Academy Head Coach, and one as an Academy Manager. Collectively, participants reported a mean of 13.67 years' coaching experience ( $SD = 8.42$  years) within their respective sports and predominantly coached male athletes, apart from the individual sports whom coached both genders.

### **Interview Guide**

Interviews followed a semi-structured approach, allowing the researchers to collect the important information about the topic of interest while giving the participants the opportunity to report on their own experiences (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Therefore, although there was a certain element of structure to the interviews, order of questions were dependent on the response of the participant. This allowed the interviewee the freedom to talk and ascribe meanings while bearing in mind the broader aims of the study (Smith, 2008). Interview questions were open-ended to allow the respondent considerable scope to express their perceptions and expand on views offered (Smith & Sparkes, 2017). Prior to data collection, a pilot interview was conducted with an assistant coach from a professional soccer academy. Following this process, no significant changes were made to the actual interview guide, although the phrasing of two questions were refined for clarity.

The final interview guide (available upon request from the first author) was structured into three sections: ice-breakers, main questions, and concluding questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). After asking participants to provide general demographic information, the ice-breaker



questions were designed to ascertain a basic understanding of the individual and their coaching experience. These questions were posed in a conversational manner and included asking participants to describe their sport, the athletes within the academy setting, and the specific environment (e.g., To begin, I would like to get to know more about your coaching role). The main section focused on effort distribution and adopted a scenario-based approach, whereby participants were asked to imagine three ‘typical’ athletes in their academy squad: the hard worker, the average athlete, and one who lacks commitment/a work ethic. With very little variation across participants, these categories were reported as 30%, 40%, and 30% respectively.

For each scenario a number of questions were posed (e.g., Could you describe how hard they work? Can you give me some examples that demonstrate this? What percentage of your squad are like this? Can you talk me through some of the methods you use to encourage commitment with your athletes?). A variety of probe and elaboration questions were employed to ensure complete understanding of respondents’ comments and enable in-depth answers to be obtained (Malterud, 2001). For concluding questions, participants were asked to reflect on their responses, and if they had anything else to add. Throughout the interviews, participants were encouraged to provide examples and discuss specific events that had occurred during their academy coaching experiences.

## **Procedure**

Participants were invited to take part via email or face-to-face correspondence, both of which included information regarding the aims and requirements of the study and all ethical procedures. In an attempt to maintain confidentiality and anonymity, it was made clear that all identifiable information would be removed, and pseudonyms would be used in any future publication (see table 1). All of the interviews were conducted by the second

author, face to face and at a location of the participant's choosing, lasting for a mean of 66.14 min ( $SD = 10.21$ ).

## **Data Analysis**

All interviews were recorded with the participant's consent and transcribed verbatim. A six-stage inductive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was then conducted by the lead author on the transcripts. In the first instance, transcripts were read and reread in their entirety until the lead author was familiar with the content, noting down initial ideas in order to gain an overall sense of the dataset. The second phase involved generating initial codes which identified key features or points of interest within the transcripts. Once data were coded, the third element consisted of collating codes into potential themes and gathering all data relevant to each theme. The fourth stage included the second and third authors as critical friends (Smith & McGannon, 2018) reviewing the entire dataset, with further development and refinement of themes to ensure meaningful representations of the data, for example, debating whether trying to fit too much into a theme at times and discussing where themes overlap. During the fifth phase, final refinements were made, generating clear names for each theme to accurately reflect the description and how they fitted into an overall story in relation to the purpose of the research. The analytic process continued throughout the final stage through the drafting of written reports. The reports were read by the co-authors who served to encourage further reflection and ensure a balance was achieved between data extracts and analytical commentary (Braun et al., 2017).

## **Methodological Rigor**

Qualitative research should be judged against criteria that align with the specific methodology employed in each study (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Accordingly, a number of steps were integrated into this study to enhance the methodological rigor. Firstly, Braun and Clarke's (2006) 15-point checklist of criteria for determining good thematic analysis was

adhered to. These included items relating to the transcription, coding, analysis, overall process, and the written report. Member reflections offered by participants, were also employed as a way to help create a meticulous, robust, and intellectually enriched understanding (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This involved dialogue with the participants following analysis to explore any gaps or similarities they shared, concerning interpretations of the findings (Schinke, McGannon, & Smith, 2013). Lastly, the first author engaged with critical friends (second and third authors) from the fourth-stage of thematic analysis, who encouraged reflection upon and questioned the emerging interpretations of the data (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

## Results

A range of experiences influenced the academy coaches' perceptions of commitment in their developing athletes. Three major themes were elicited within the inductive analysis and are presented with representative verbatim quotes: a) what do we want? b) what are they like? and c) what do we do? (see table 2).

### What Do We Want?

In this theme, participants discussed the qualities pertaining to the committed athlete within their academy structures. Specifically, two sub themes emerged: characteristics of the 'ideal' athlete and balancing the performance and winning focus.

**Characteristics of the 'ideal' athlete.** The academy athletes in question all met various physical and technical standards to be selected into these high-performance environments. Interestingly, coaches discussed how the character of the athletes was right at the heart of what they are looking for: "So if we get the character right that's what our priority is, we need to develop the character" (Aaron, Badminton). This was also exemplified at the organizational level, where Ben (Soccer) highlighted his academy ethos:

249 Our academy is about the person before the player, because at a young age we try and  
250 want them to be humble, hardworking, respectful, and genuinely good characters.

251 Obviously, that isn't always the case but that's what we aim for.

252 With regards to character, there was unanimous agreement on the qualities coaches  
253 wanted to see in their developing athletes: "You know discipline, respect, commitment,  
254 appreciation of values" (Tom, Cricket). These defining features of the hardworking and  
255 committed athlete were irrespective of sport and emphasized as a key characteristic, not only  
256 at the academy level, but also if these athletes were to have a subsequently successful career:  
257 "High levels of commitment are completely necessary in order to fit into the broader culture  
258 of the club and are especially important when it comes to transition to first team" (Jack,  
259 Rugby Union).

260 Underpinning this notion of sustained development, participants noted how their best  
261 athletes: "... take ownership for everything they do" (Gary, Rugby League). This consisted  
262 of coaches stressing the importance of developing independence within their athletes:  
263 "Autonomous and takes enough responsibility for their development as we get them to be  
264 self-regulating athletes" (Jack, Rugby Union). However, a noteworthy take on this was  
265 highlighted by David (Judo) in that, in order to take responsibility for their personal  
266 development, athletes needed to utilize the various support services on offer to them:

267 The best ones in this place are the ones that make use of this place as a whole, use the  
268 psychologist, the nutritionist, the physios, use the S&C guys, they're less dependent  
269 as in the fact that they'll hunt and source these service for themselves. They're  
270 realizing that they can't do it on their own.

271 **Balancing the performance and winning focus.** In the second sub-theme,  
272 participants discussed the reality that their athletes were on a developmental journey: "The  
273 process along the way what would get you that step up the ladder. We say Olympic golds at

the top of the ladder, you're not gonna do it in one go, so we try to chunk it down" (Mark, Swimming). Due to the academy nature of these environments, the importance of the processes and learning opportunities for these developing athletes was conversed: "You get a sense of the ones that are fully focused and switched on to doing it...you can see they've got a real passion to learn and wanna improve" (John, Soccer). It was apparent participants advocated both outcome and process-based types of focus and the key was achieving the right balance between the two:

Players that are result orientated worry me, they gotta be competitive as hell and that's the balance, so I want players that are out there developing; they know what they've gotta do every time they walk on the tennis court, they know what they're trying to do to improve. (Nathan, Tennis)

Moreover, there was an undisputed opinion from coaches not to underplay the performance side of sport, winning is inherently important. Thus, all interviewed wanted this balance between results today and development for tomorrow:

I think they're getting used to the fact they don't just rely on the end score; this is not first team football this is not results driven business. Don't get me wrong, I wanna win every football game but not if at the same time they're making mistakes for fun and the other team's not good enough to punish us, I don't think you should as a coach ever come away and go yeah, we was great today we won 5-0. (James, Soccer)

### **What Are They Like?**

As opposed to discussing the type of athletes participants ideally wanted, the next theme concerned the reality of what coaches were actually getting within their academy environments, with three sub themes emerging: relationship between commitment and talent, maturity or lack of, and what's driving these athletes?

**Relationship between commitment and talent.** A recurring theme was apparent across all participants regarding the perceived relationship between commitment and talent:

Majority of them are committed and hardworking, however you have the ones that aren't and unfortunately, they're often the ones that are the very talented, the mavericks if you like; they're the ones that could make the top level. (Ben, Soccer)

This was in contrast to the ideal characteristics previously discussed, with participants observing less than favorable attributes in many of their most talented athletes: "If I had to name the top 10 players I've ever coached, I'd probably say three or four of them you could deem as lazy" (John, Soccer). From a more global perspective, Paul (Rugby League) spoke about this being part and parcel of all youth sport: "There's so much talent with these kids, but I think whatever environment you have, the best in the world or the worst, I think you'll always get them individuals".

Discussing the reasons for this lack of commitment, participants were passionate in their perceived underlying causes:

The problem is 'cos of the talent, we're talking about (names club) it's because the talent is exceptional. At that given time and as an under 16-year-old they're not just a good player, they're bordering best in the country or the top 10 in Europe and they become aware of that because of everything that surrounds them. (John, Soccer)

It was acknowledged that, because of this exceptional talent, academy players may have already started to reap the rewards without being fully committed: "They think getting picked in the academy is the be all and end all; no it's not, it's irrelevant; it's just an opportunity for you to step to the next level" (Tom, Cricket). The nature of the academy programmes being full-time was deemed an influential factor in this relationship, with coaches perceiving youth athletes becoming a bit blasé: "The early professionalization for me is because they're in academy too soon and it becomes a norm... You get in the academy now

it's harder to get out than get in" (Ben, Soccer). Similarly, coaches expressed their frustration with having to commit to individuals earlier on: "Familiarity can breed complacency and they can get comfortable and content; this is just what we do every day" (John, Soccer). Gary (Rugby League) resonated with this from his coaching experience, where problems were perceived to result from athletes not wanting to put the work in that is required at this level: "If I'm honest with you I don't think they wanna work hard enough, that's the issue". This was further emphasized as a lack of self-awareness of what is required, with some athletes not committed to applying themselves outside of their scheduled training:

They believe that walking through the door here twice a day and just getting in and going through the motions is enough to get them to the top and it's not. That's four out of 24 hours a day, it's what you're doing in those other 20 hours. (Mark, Swimming)

Coaches gave an honest insight into how it affected them to see this lack of commitment in some of their most talented athletes:

Very disappointing to a point where I get too frustrated with the fact they're not working hard. Can't see why they wouldn't when they've got all the trappings that they could have from all the rewards for hard work. 'Cos the ones that I'm talking about, they're the ones that have the talent to actually get to the top. (Ryan, Soccer)

For David (Judo), a similar emotive response was shared in relation to some of his most talented athletes missing training sessions: "Will go and pick up medals still, but not done the work, not done the graft for it, and that to me is upsetting because I think Christ what could you be like if you did do that?" The feelings of upset, disappointment, and frustration expressed by the coaches led Mark (Swimming) to admit: "I'd rather have a less talented but totally committed athlete in the group than somebody who's got all the talent in the world but doesn't want to invest". As a thought-provoking point to this sub theme, Ben (Soccer)

348 questioned whether you are likely to see any improvements with the lesser committed  
349 athletes: “I’m not a specialist in behaviors, but when I see kids at 14, 15, 16 and they’re lazy,  
350 they’re arrogant, they’re not hard working, you can guarantee they’ll be the same at 25, 26,  
351 27, 28”.

352       **Maturity or lack of!** Participants repeatedly reported there was not a lack of ability  
353 or talent in their academy athletes. Instead: “There is a lack of maturity in how that player  
354 operates, how independent he is, how much the parent runs their lives, make decisions, does  
355 everything for them” (Tom, Cricket). This was in contrast to earlier descriptions of the ideal  
356 characteristics, whereby coaches promoted the development of independence in their athletes.  
357 However, whether the parents of these athletes were also promoting independence was  
358 frequently questioned by the coaches: “They want them to do well, but sometimes they have  
359 to let go of them and say find your feet, make some decisions on how you’re gonna operate  
360 on your own” (Paul, Rugby League). In relation to this lack of independence, coaches also  
361 shared reflections when taking their athletes to tournaments:

362       That’s probably one thing I look at when I go to overseas junior events, I will feel that  
363 our players are just a little bit behind on a maturity level. I just see Europeans a bit  
364 more self-assured, a bit more worldliness about them.

365       Nathan (Tennis) acknowledged that, although this could be a generalization, he also  
366 had observed British players being less independent and maturing later in comparison to their  
367 European counterparts. Again, parents were deemed influential in these levels of maturity:  
368 “You want great parental support, but they can’t wrap them in cotton wool. It’s tough for  
369 parents because this day and age they want to, and duty of care and stuff is huge now”  
370 (Nathan, Tennis). One of the perceived issues with this lack of maturity was expressed by  
371 James (Soccer): “You’re trying to make boys realize but no matter how many times you say  
372 or the type of message you give them, some of them just literally won’t pick it up until they



mature”. This had implications for the coaches in terms of their athletes not taking on board the information they were trying to convey. When considering the purpose of the academy set-ups across the respective sports, a potential shortcoming was highlighted due to this:

There’s an immaturity in some of our players, they don’t work out what you want them to work out as a 15, 16, 17 year old, it may take them until they’re 22, 23, 24. The trouble is at 22, 23, 24 they’ve been bypassed, or their moment’s gone. (Tom, Cricket)

**What’s driving these athletes?** A clear sport divide was apparent when participants discussed the motives driving their athletes. Only the soccer coaches referred to the “financial benefits” (Ryan, Soccer) and external sources:

Nowadays it’s changed massively I think fame, but that’s instant fame, instant likes on social media, liked by a million followers on Twitter, I wanna be a millionaire, and I want the best girlfriend on my arm. Great if that’s what’s driving you in training every day go and do it, but it can’t be detrimental to your training. (Ben, Soccer)

Due to the perceived rewards and external benefits, the soccer coaches also recounted peculiar motives within their sport, stemming from socio-economic influences: “We’ve worked with players that have come from horrible backgrounds that are probably getting driven by wanting better for the people around them” (John).

In contrast, coaches from the other team sports described more internal motives driving their athletes: “It won’t be money; at the start when they first come in, it’s that love of the game, enjoy playing, they wanna be with their mates” (Tom, Cricket). From an individual sport perspective, Aaron (Badminton) spoke about the personal achievements and medal opportunities driving his athletes at European, World, and Olympic level: “That’s what it means to them and that’s what it means to us, so the sport in itself recognizes that, it doesn’t recognize the financial gain”. Personal achievements were also brought to life by

David (Judo), who emphasized the importance of a task orientation, such as effort and skill development: “There are no external motivations; you do it to achieve your own goal, your own gratification; you wanna be as great as you can be as a person in that sport as an athlete”.

Participants further expanded these explanations of what was driving their athletes, concluding that: “If I’m honest I don’t care really as long as I know what motivates them” (Gary, Rugby League). This notion of taking the time to understand the individual athlete, regardless of the sport, was supported by James (Soccer):

They’re all individual, part of the challenge as a coach is to find out what drives him, it makes your job easier. But there are also some lads that have an inner drive that might be something that you know nothing about...but at the same time I think some of them are not driven at all.

#### **What Do We Do?**

The next theme aimed to understand the different strategies coaches employed to either deal with the characteristics associated with a lack of commitment or promote the ideal behaviors in their academy athletes. Four sub themes were as follows: use of role models, good old-fashioned honesty, punishment versus praise, and sending messages their way.

**Use of role models.** A variation was evident between coaches using high-profile athletes within the academy set-ups. From one end of the continuum, Nathan (Tennis) mentioned a high-profile athlete he uses within his sport: “We’ve been fortunate enough to have Andy Murray as our big role model over the past sort of 10 years now and Andy is known for being one of the most committed athletes out there”. High-profile role models were considered to have a greater impact, in terms of the important messages coaches wanted to get across to their athletes: “Bring someone in who’s been there and done it, who the athlete respects and looks up to, and same event they swim, to sit down and try and tease

those things out of them” (Mark, Swimming). Alternatively, the following quote depicts reasoning for coaches using different levels of role models:

We’d use a lot of senior role models and by senior I don’t always just mean (names ex-player); it’s players that are in the year above or two years above in the academy, so a closer level to them. I think sometimes the elite examples are too high. (John, Soccer)

Coaches shared experiences where they had selected athletes from the age group above, with the aim of demonstrating the hard work and commitment characteristics required in the sport: “You just create a situation where they are working alongside; they might see the difference, they witness it and experience it” (Aaron, Badminton). Building on from this, John (Soccer) gave an example from his coaching practice where he purposefully pairs up a hard-working athlete with another from the same age group, whose mentality he would class as lazy, in the hope that the committed player influences them. “I think you’ve gotta drop in little things that influence as opposed to change, I think it’s very difficult to change people, you’ve just gotta influence their behavior”. A similar sentiment was expressed by Nathan (Tennis) as something he spends time contemplating when selecting players for training camps: “Surrounding them with the right type of players, for me is critical, they’re role models in their own right. Players with not so good characteristics they hopefully imitate those players”. This notion of changing players’ characteristics through imitation, led some coaches to admit it was even worth keeping players contracted because of their influence: “Three or four in each age group that are never gonna make it at our club, they might not even make it the next level down, but what they are gonna do is help the other lads” (Ben, Soccer).

**Good old-fashioned honesty.** Another key approach which coaches advocated

within their environments was the importance of being honest with their athletes: “There’s a huge amount of honesty coming out from me, and from our staff cos you know it’d be difficult not to deliver in a similar way” (Tom, Cricket). This was reiterated by James (Soccer) as a necessary step in trying to change his players’ behaviors: “Being up front and honest with lads and telling them when they ain’t doing it is certainly the way that I would always work, the more you skate around it the longer it’ll go on”. Aaron (Badminton) went on to describe how he tries to understand the individual athlete by having a number of honest conversations:

We agree this person’s lazy then you have a conversation and find out something completely different is happening in their life, which is manifesting itself in the appearance of laziness. So, you go back to trying to understand the person and the character rather than just diving into what the issue is.

An association to being honest with their athletes was also made by the coaches with regard to the reality of progressing from the academy set-up: “We have to keep reminding them of that reality as well; you need to let them know that obviously to be a player at (names club) that is going to be very few and far between” (James, Soccer). This was also used with players who were consistently demonstrating a lack of commitment within their current academy environment: “You know if this isn’t fucking stopping you’re gonna be away from (names club) don’t think it’s gonna be easy when you leave here”. Ben (Soccer) described this as the shock tactic and something he reverts to as a last resort if other strategies have not had the required impact. As an adjunct to this, Ryan (Soccer) explained he used this reality check as a motivational tool: “You also need to remind them that the opportunity to be a footballer is right in front of them because they’re already on the ladder”. Ryan further stressed the importance of coaches reminding their players, regardless of the sport, that this opportunity is within their grasp.

**Punishment versus praise.** Within the academy environments, all the soccer coaches implemented physical punishments with the aim to change their athletes' behaviors and made these sanctions either individual or team based for their respective sport. An example of a team-based sanction was described by John (Soccer): "It's a set of line runs with clap press ups in between, basically something that physically is horrible, no one enjoys it, the whole team does it". Ryan (Soccer) provided an interesting take on this, adopted from the military: "If for example, somebody is letting the team down, the rest of the team gets punished to do extra work. He isn't involved and has to watch it from outside". Conversely, coaches from the other sports did not support the use of physical punishment, believing it to either be a waste of time: "There's no learning in that, there's nothing new" (David, Judo) or as Jack (Rugby Union) explained: "When is training hard ever gonna be a punishment? That should be just what we do around here". The coaches' recounted that their experiences were, in part, influenced by the poor performances or attitudes of their players. Gary (Rugby League) discussed how, following a defeat which he attributed to a lack of commitment, instead of physical punishment, he got the whole rugby team to complete jobs around the training ground: "It's that message of we need to show working hard, what they're going to be doing with their lives if they're not applying themselves. So, there's a message behind it". Finally, Tom (Cricket) debated what he could take away from his cricketers that might affect them enough to change their behavior: "I hate pulling players out of games because that's what we play for, I've probably got the ultimate sanction is remove them from the programme, but that's like the end of the road".

Conversely, the coaches reflected how it's just as important to praise their players as it is to punish or let them know when they are not doing something correctly: "It's encouraging and praising them I think at the right times" (Nathan, Tennis). This transpired as the athletes feeling like they have been rewarded for their behaviors: "Showing some reward

and generally it is only positive feedback of we like what you're doing" (Paul, Rugby League). James (Soccer) also stressed the important of praising his players, but extended this by ensuring the individual knows why they are receiving this acclaim:

It's just as important to praise the ones that are leading by example, are always on time, whether it'll be praise in front of the group, team selection, certain perks of the group, you need to make sure that you do reward them in whatever way you see fit, but at the same time make sure that it's known what reason it's for.

**Sending messages their way.** Across the different sports, coaches expressed the importance of staying up to date with technology in terms of how they were communicating with their academy athletes: "I think kids are all social media... visually learning, communication is at its peak. They're always texting, so we do a lot of video stuff with them" (Ben, Soccer). Potentially due to the age of the academy athletes, the use of video was a key aid in how coaches are trying to get their messages across:

This generation of players learn through watching, the slightly older ones they don't actually like watching themselves... It's interesting the younger ones wanna watch themselves all the time, that's how they learn. The most powerful report I do now is not a written report it's video footage, show that's the way you do it. (Nathan, Tennis)

In addition to the athletes watching themselves, coaches also searched for video footage across different sports that represented commitment, or the associated characteristics:

We'll have a little browse on YouTube where you go oh that's decent just fire it round... Receiving a four-minute video on WhatsApp is their world as opposed to come and sit in a class room and look at a big screen I think. (John, Soccer)

A different use of WhatsApp was described by Jack (Rugby Union) with one of his players who struggled to be self-disciplined: "At the end of each day he'll send over what he's done... I suppose as a result of feeling like he needed somebody standing over him and

telling him what to do”. Jack did reflect on this clearly not being the end result of what they aim for with their players however: “This WhatsApp group was used as a bit of a scaffold to help him”.

On the flip side to all the positives of technology, John (Soccer) highlighted how social media could undo or promote contrasting messages to his academy athletes:

We work in a world where you go on Twitter or Instagram after a game and a player could’ve had an absolute stinker and straight away what you see is hundreds or thousands of comments from supporters going brilliant performance tonight.

Responding to this, John went on to explain that he would sit down with the player and spend time showing video evidence to counteract these comments: “I’ll show you it and go no that is not it and that will always trump; if he doesn’t see it then he’s got no chance in the game”. As a summary to the different strategies presented, Ben (Soccer) provided a pertinent conclusion regarding the idiosyncratic nature of the youth performers he coaches:

You’ve just gotta find out what works for the lad in my opinion and try and take away your own beliefs in it because not everyone’s gonna have the same beliefs as me. We’re not all made the same and so yeah you gotta find what works for the kid.

### **Discussion**

The current study aimed to obtain academy coaches’ perceptions regarding commitment in their developing athletes. Given, National Governing Body (NGB) and professional sporting organization initiatives to produce world-class performers, this is a pivotal time for athletes to negotiate key developmental opportunities. Therefore, appropriate levels of commitment are seen as fundamental to the adolescent athlete, if they are to be successful in progressing through their high-performance pathway or professional academy structures. Findings have subsequently provided an intuitive insight to the perceived levels of commitment and associated behaviors across a range of sporting environments. Overall, the

interviews revealed a consistent message regarding the differences between the ideal commitment characteristics and the reality of the adolescent athlete, which accordingly influenced the strategies coaches employed.

With this in mind, there was unanimous agreement across the participants regarding the defining features of the hardworking and committed athlete, including being humble, respectful, disciplined, having an appreciation of values, taking ownership for development, and genuinely being good characters. These characteristics have previously been identified as positive features of the development process (e.g., Collins & MacNamara, 2012; Gould et al., 2002). Moreover, it was encouraging to see the coaches in this study emphasizing and conversing the importance of the processes and learning opportunities for their developing athletes, while finding the balance with a results orientation (cf. Duda, 2001; Harwood & Beauchamp, 2007). However, whether each of the high-performance pathway or professional academies successfully promoted these positive characteristics and environments was an interesting topic of discussion by the participants. For instance, cultural and organizational differences (Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018) were apparent across the sports with regards to their set-ups, coaching practices, athletes, and specific motives and rewards. These idiosyncrasies may provide reasons why some environments seemed to work better than others in facilitating the committed athlete. The soccer coaches, for example, noted how the early specialization (players are recruited to soccer academies at age eight, i.e., as under nine's) and full-time nature of their programmes was deemed an influential factor in some of their athletes becoming complacent, blasé, and already perceiving to reap the rewards without being fully committed. This therefore highlights a wider issue for the NGBs and professional sporting organizations, regarding the impact of their current structure and practices for developing the next generation of athlete.



Across these high-performance environments, there was a recurring theme regarding the relationship between the most talented athletes displaying the least committed attitudes and behaviors. Specifically, coaches expressed consistent emotive responses of upset, disappointment, and frustration when seeing their athletes potentially squander development opportunities by engaging in maladaptive behaviors and challenging attitudes. According to the sport commitment model (Scanlan et al., 1993), enjoyment, affiliation, challenge, and rewards are commonly cited as reasons for participating in competitive sport. Conversely, developing athletes who believe ability leads to success rather than effort have been linked to less adaptive responses such as, boredom, negative attitudes, and a lack of enjoyment (e.g., Carpenter & Morgan, 1999; Weiss et al., 2010). Offering an additional explanation, the adolescent athlete experiences maturational imbalances between the development of socioemotional and cognitive control systems, leading them to exhibit less than desirable behaviors (Schnell et al., 2014; Steinberg, 2010). Similar to this study's findings, previous researchers have also discovered the combination of the developing adolescent and high-performance expectations have led to athletes displaying challenging behaviors, emotional unpredictability, vulnerability, and commitment issues (Devaney et al., 2018; Hill, et al., 2015; Morris et al., 2016). It would seem sensible for coaches engaged at this level to receive knowledge and support focused on dealing with these challenges; arguably a more important issue than the technical/tactical emphasis which characterizes many coach education schemes.

In a similar vein, a discrepancy was apparent between the coaches' ideal characteristic of independence and the lack of maturity they encountered in their academy athletes. Due to the ages of these developing athletes, parents were unsurprisingly deemed influential in this characteristic (Côté, 1999; Holt & Dunn, 2004). Researchers have tended to focus on the broad contribution of parents to the development of talented athletes, in addition to specific

positive (supportive) and negative (pressurizing) influences on children's psychosocial experiences (e.g., Harwood & Knight, 2015; Lauer, Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010). However, as Dorsch, Smith, and Dotterer (2016) identified, the distinction between pressuring behaviors as negative and supportive behaviors as positive, is not necessarily as straight-forward a dichotomy as it seems. For example, the coaches in this study discussed how seemingly positive supportive parents contributed to their developing athletes demonstrating a lack of maturity in how they operate, an inability to take on board messages, a lack of independence to make their own decisions, and not taking ownership for their development. Sporting parents may therefore need to facilitate developing levels of independence, beyond their child's physical maturation years, if they are to successfully transition to senior sport (Schnell et al., 2014; Stambulova et al., 2015). Although researchers have begun to study the complexities and challenges of being a sport parent (e.g., Knight, Berrow, & Harwood, 2017), this warrants an interesting avenue for future research investigation. It may be that parenting a performer requires a subtly different skillset to that needed to parent a child! A particular issue in the face of the growing number of commercial providers of parent support.

Of course, addressing these derailment issues is best addressed as a total environment challenge. For example, the impact of talented academy athletes exhibiting less than desirable behaviors, missing development opportunities, and maturing beyond their key transition periods, raises important implications for sport psychologists working within these high-performance environments. This firstly might include raising awareness of what is required across the development pathways and secondly to try and modify these challenging/maladaptive attitudes and behaviors; both perhaps best attempted at pre-adolescent ages. From an applied sport psychology perspective, the cognitive-behavioral model has frequently been cited as the predominant approach within this field (e.g., Fortin-Guichard et al. 2018;

McArdle & Moore, 2012; Winter & Collins, 2015). The approach lends itself to the issues identified by the coaches in this study, in that the cognitive-behavioral model advocates allocating appropriate techniques to focus on both changes in problem behavior and transforming maladaptive cognitions to those that are readily adaptable (Burton & Raedeke, 2008). This is certainly the idea which underpins approaches such as the Psychological Characteristics of Developing Excellence (PCDEs – MacNamara et al., 2010) where skills are taught, tested, and refined as an explicit part of the developmental curriculum. Concerningly, however, participants noted how they had habitually seen these maladaptive attitudes and behaviors remaining unchanged in the athletes they coached. It is outside the scope of this research, to comment whether sport psychology provision was currently in place within each of these high-performance environments. Alternatively, whether consultation was focused at a group or organizational level and hence sufficient time was not allocated to facilitate individual consultation and subsequent behavior change to occur. Regardless, it warrants the sporting organizations and sport psychology community to reflect on their current support programmes and consider the nuances of working with the talented adolescence athlete. Future research would therefore benefit from case studies examples, where practitioners have successfully impacted on commitment issues and subsequent modification of maladaptive behaviors and attitudes.

Regarding the reported strategies by the coaches, an interesting finding was the use of technology in the ‘sending messages their way’ sub theme of this study. With increases in social media use, it can be perceived as a negative distraction, however the coaches in this study embraced technological advancements to communicate with their academy athletes (e.g., Gould, Nalepa, & Mignano, 2019). This included the use of WhatsApp, YouTube, and video, for disseminating specific sporting footage to represent commitment and associated characteristics, as supporting evidence for athlete development, and as a platform for coaches

to convey their messages. Sport psychologists working within these high-performance pathway or professional academy environments often use educational workshops as their mode of delivery (Sharp, Woodcock, Holland, Cumming, & Duda, 2013). Workshops enable an educational platform from which to stage a discursive environment focused on sport psychology skills and techniques (Gould, Petlichkoff, Hodge, & Simons, 1990; Poczwardowski & Lauer, 2006). However, interestingly, some of the coaches highlighted how receiving a short video on WhatsApp is more suited to the adolescent athlete than the traditional method of sitting in a classroom for a 40-minute to 1-hour educational workshop. This, therefore, may be an opportune time and demographic for sport psychology practitioners to embrace the use of technology within their applied work (e.g., Murphy 2009; Pitt et al., 2015).

A final finding was the strategic way coaches used role models within their performance environments. In addition to high-profile sporting role models, coaches discussed how they would purposefully create situations whereby their athletes work alongside or be paired-up with a hard-working athlete in the hope their commitment attitudes and behaviors would have a positive influence. Most often called observational learning, modeling, imitation, or vicarious experience, this is a process of observing the actions of another person and subsequently adapting one's own actions accordingly (e.g., McCullough, Law, & Ste Marie, 2012). In offering further insight to applied practitioners, coaches reported how they would retain or keep less talented athletes contracted, based on their influential mentality. In his account of social learning theory, Bandura (1977) noted that unlike imitation, observational learning is characterized by enduring changes in an individual's actions. For this to occur, Bandura proposed four underlying functions: the learner should pay attention to relevant information; that retention of the information should occur; the desired behavior should be accurately reproduced; and there should be adequate

motivation to do so. Therefore, according to this theory, attentional processes play a pivotal role if athletes are to learn and be influenced through observation. Mere exposure to a committed and hard-working athlete does not guarantee any adoption or enduring changes in an individual's actions, especially if there is a lack of desire to do so (Weiss & Ferrer-Caja, 2002). It would, therefore, be pragmatic for future researchers to test this empirically within different sporting environments.

While the present study exemplifies a range of interesting findings regarding academy coaches' perceptions of commitment in their developing athletes, it is not without limitations. It is apparent that, although there are many idiosyncrasies in different sports, there are also many similarities. Nevertheless, the results of this study must be considered within the sporting environments the coaches were employed and do not necessarily represent the experiences of all UK academy environments or high-performance pathways (Lyle, 2018). Given that the social environment and, by extension, the cultural milieu can play a significant role, it would be worth future research exploring the extent that these findings are generalizable to other countries, cultural contexts, and indeed other sports (e.g., aesthetic sports, for example). Coaches and applied practitioners intending to use these findings to impact their delivery, should therefore bear this in mind. On the other hand, Carradice, Shankland, and Beail (2002) believe that, when considering a qualitative study, the research should be evaluated by the applicability of the concepts to other situations and to others involved in the phenomenon. We therefore propose 'naturalistic generalizability' (Smith, 2018) and encourage readers to make connections where appropriate, look for overlaps in their own sporting environments, and selectively transfer the applicable findings.

Limitations notwithstanding, this study provides a valuable insight into the perspective of academy coaches regarding commitment in their developing athletes. We highlight this as an important area of focus for sporting organizations, researchers,

practitioners, parents, and coaches who aim to support their athletes negotiate key developmental opportunities and successfully progress to senior sport. Findings have outlined pertinent differences between the ideal commitment characteristics and the reality of the adolescent athlete, along with current strategies coaches are employing within their practice. Specifically, by adding to the understanding and persistence of this issue, we hope practitioners can use the information to tailor their interventions and service provision accordingly. As one of several examples, practitioners might consider how they might develop *and* deploy mental skills and environmental parameters to help athletes achieve well operationalized desirable behaviors (cf. Collins, MacNamara, & Cruikshank, 2018).

Finally, by adopting a cross-sport approach, we offer NGBs an opportunity to look outside their own sporting organizations in seeking best practice recommendations. The similarity of challenge across the sports examined, against the varied approaches used to address it, would suggest great benefit in coaches sharing ideas and practice across similar domains as well as within their own sporting pathways.

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